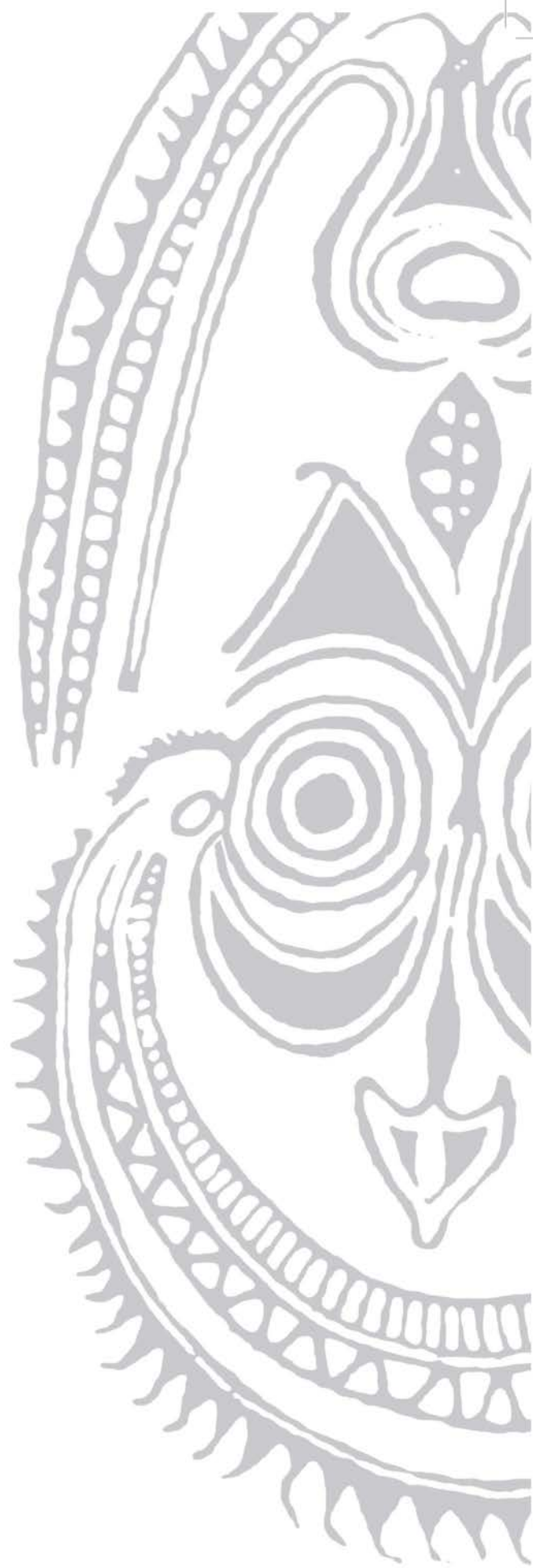


# The Stars are Eyes

A new perspective on the Art of the Abelam

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by Marc Assayag











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In this innovative treatment of the artwork of the Abelam people of Papua New Guinea, Marc Assayag urges us to consider art from a variety of orientations and perspectives. Deploying a series of remarkable images, Assayag demonstrates how (graphically speaking), Abelam representations present the viewer with complementary meanings when observed from a variety of angles (especially upside down). In so doing, he has convincingly exposed a "blind spot" in how Westerners experience "vision" itself, revealing how elements of Abelam design have heretofore remained imperceptible to Westerners.

A key element in Assayag's developing insight occurred in New York, where he had recently purchased a New Guinea wood carving: a Sepik River Barak/Parak Mosquito mask. He displayed it to a friend, who appraised it briefly and remarked, "...why are you showing me the mask upside down?" This took Marc aback, causing him to reconsider what was "right side up" and what was "upside down" and why, and what could be learned from considering the mask from a totally different perspective. Suddenly the work took on entirely new meanings as new images revealed themselves to him, forcefully exposing how limited and habituated his Westerner's vision had been.

When Marc first approached me with his thoughts on inspecting Abelam art "upside-down", I was skeptical. But I thought about a friend of mine who had hung an Abelam yam mask I had given her upside down on her wall, and of the difficulty I had had explaining to her how I "knew" it was

# Foreword

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Dr. Richard Scaglion

reversed. Marc then provided me with enough upside down images of Abelam artwork (some of which are included in this volume) to convince me that there was really something to this, after all. I reasoned that, because Abelam ancestral spirits reside in the sky, as they look down on a ceremonial ground (*amé*), viewing the façade of a spirit house (*kurambu*), for example, they'd be seeing things "upside down" (from a terrestrial standpoint). Shouldn't the ancestors be thought of as another audience for whom art is being produced? And shouldn't the artwork then be designed to be viewed from both perspectives?

And, when producing a large piece, don't many artists often work on it simultaneously, all the while viewing it from multiple angles?

In retrospect, I really should not have been so cynical about all this. During my initial fieldwork with the Abelam in 1974-76, I experienced many events that should have alerted me to how Abelam perspectives fundamentally differed from Western viewpoints. For example, I remember the first time I received printed photographs (which I had sent to Australia to be developed) in Neligum Village. With great excitement and anticipation, I prepared to show them to my Abelam friends. But I was more than disappointed with the results. I handed one man a photo of his mother. He rotated it around and around in three-dimensional space, flipping it front to back, side to side, and then handed it back to me without comment. Clearly, he hadn't "seen" it as I saw it.

I wondered if it might be because, in Abelam art, human-like representations always display bilateral symmetry. Was this man simply rotating the picture to find such symmetry, and failing to successfully "orient" himself in this way, he couldn't then "see" the image? I resorted to taking photos of people standing "at attention". Showing these images to my Abelam friends, I would orient the photo "correctly", pointing out arms and legs and faces and such, which they appeared to "see". But

they continued to do something that really frustrated me. They might hold the photo “sideways”; i.e., rotated 90 degrees from “normal,” or even upside down, and had no problems with that. I’d often “right” the picture for them, which they accepted, but seemed to think unnecessary.

In a personal communication to Assayag, Christian Kaufmann noticed the same thing. Kaufmann wrote: “In 1966 as well as later, I also experienced that Sepik local experts when looking at paper photographs... were able to clearly identify objects or persons they knew while keeping the picture upside down or sideways, even while talking about specific details in the picture.” Anthony Forge likewise noticed the same phenomenon, but explained it thusly: *“Their vision has been socialized in a way that makes photographs especially incomprehensible, just as ours is socialized to see photographs and indeed to regard them as in some sense more truthful than what the eyes see”*.<sup>1</sup> Many years after the fact, I now disagree with Forge that our photographs were “incomprehensible” to our Abelam friends back then. Assayag suggests here that Abelam just may have been looking for much more in our photos than we ourselves were.

If these features of Abelam artwork seem complex, we should keep in mind that traditional art (and the religion it embodies) was designed to possess “secret” or “hidden” meanings, carrying complicated messages that did not reveal themselves easily. Uninitiated persons were never meant to “understand” what they saw. But even for initiates, I don’t believe that meanings were clearly explicated. Understandings emerged slowly over a lifetime of contemplation, as one participated in ceremonial life. “Secrets” were not revealed to initiates any more than they were to anthropologists. In the waning days of “traditional” practices, which Assayag traces to the late 1980s, when elderly Abelam in Neligum were almost desperate to pass along traditional knowledge to me (one of the few persons still apparently interested in acquiring it), I never got what would pass as “explanations” in the Western sense. As Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin puts it:

*“As I have pointed out on several previous occasions, imagery is never explained in the form of verbal exegesis; the Abelam do not require a consistent explanation for beings that are represented by means of visual media, either as three-dimensional sculptures or two-dimensional paintings. Instead, the system of cross-referencing signs is an open one, providing leeway for multiple and diverse interpretations.”*<sup>2</sup>

It is exactly these diverse interpretations that Marc Assayag encourages us to explore here. There is not now and never was any “correct” account of what Abelam art “means,” and any search for one is futile. Just as “explanations” in the Western sense were never offered to Abelam initiates themselves, Assayag furnishes no easy answers for the reader. Instead, he encourages us to expand our vision and explore more possibilities than we’ve been accustomed to doing. By inspecting and considering Abelam artwork from multiple orientations and perspectives, this volume urges us to take our appreciation for Abelam art in an entirely new direction.

1 Anthony Forge. *Style and Meaning - Essays on the Anthropology of Art*, Alison Clark and Nicholas Thomas (eds), Sidestone Press. Series Pacific Presence, volume 1, 2017, pp. 118

2 Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin. *Ceremonial houses of the Abelam-Papua New Guinea: architecture and ritual - a passage to the ancestors*, Intro. Goolwa: Crawford House Publishing, 2015. pp 173



FIG. 1







# Yam Masks

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**Yam masks** are enigmatic creations that can be found in an incredible variety of styles. Rather than reformulate what has been said of them a thousand times, the following is a generic description from the Metropolitan Museum of Art website:

*One of the major focuses of ceremonial life among the Abelam people of northeast New Guinea is the competitive growth and exchange of long yams. The Abelam cultivate two distinct categories of yams—a small variety used as ordinary food and long yams, massive tubers that can be as much as twelve feet long. A man's social status is determined largely by his success in growing long yams. Each man has a permanent exchange partner to whom he ceremonially presents his largest yams following the annual harvest, later receiving those of his rival in return. Men who are consistently able to give their partners longer yams than they receive gain great prestige.*

*Lavishly adorned for the presentation ceremony, the finest long yams are essentially transformed into human images, decorated in the manner of men in full ceremonial regalia. The "heads" of the enormous tubers are adorned with specially made yam masks, which are made exclusively for yams and are never worn by humans.*

*The largest of the long yams are considered revered ancestors and receive particular care. Consequently they are also adorned with masks of greater ritual importance.*

Design wise, as prolific as they are, the masks resemble no particular creature and, other than being sometimes referred to as birdlike entities, they are generally described by their function, or composition, rather than their appearance. Seen from the proposed angle however, the masks seem to provide revered ancestors with something equally important in New Guinea culture: a grinning skull.







FIG. 9



FIG. 9a



It takes a moment to habituate the eye to the new imagery; but clearly, in addition to our traditional viewing angle, these masks also display upside down. Furthermore, in the case of Fig. 7, the imagery of a bird's head, seen from above, is created by the two spots and pointed beak painted onto the mask's woven sub structure.

Even if they are just as three dimensional, Yam masks are visibly shallower in construction than Baba masks. As such, it becomes difficult for an artist to find the space in which to incorporate elements that make up additional characters. Therefore, when extant, these elements only exist in lateral viewing angles.

Contextually, I have used the term "lateral angle" to try and better describe the angle of viewing created when an object is both turned sideways *and* viewed from the side rather than just being viewed from the side. Said differently, in both cases an object would be viewed from the side but in one case it would be standing up and, in the other, lying down. The small, headdress-like hair ornament in Fig. 12(a,b) illustrates this better than could many words. It is not from Abelam, but was made by the neighboring latmul, whose creation myth includes a crocodile as a central figure. Anecdotally, according to John Friede, it is also the very first object of Oceanic art he ever purchased.

To date, only a few Yam masks have been found that illustrate a third character from the lateral angle. Furthermore, in some cases, such as the examples below, (Figs. 10b,c,d) there is a subtle shift that occurs from two to three dimensional planes when viewing the masks from a particular lateral angle. Incredibly, this dimension too was incorporated in these examples.

## Lateral Viewing

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This convention-free manner of presenting imagery underlines how rigid and limited our own vision has become. Contrary to music, where the process seems to have gone the opposite way, it seems our vision has remained stubbornly fixed. The art of Abelam, it seems, is here to remind us of that fact.

Simply said, there are no rules, and since culturally, no explanations are given to viewers, each is left to find individual imagery on any one mask, and in any direction.

This aspect was underlined by Hauser-Schäublin: "As I have pointed out on several previous occasions, imagery is never explained in the form of verbal exegesis; the Abelam do not require a consistent explanation for beings that are represented by means of visual media, either as three-dimensional sculptures or two-dimensional paintings. Instead, the system of cross-referencing signs is an open one, providing leeway for multiple and diverse interpretations."<sup>27</sup>



FIG. 10





FIG. 10a



FIG. 10b



FIG. 10c

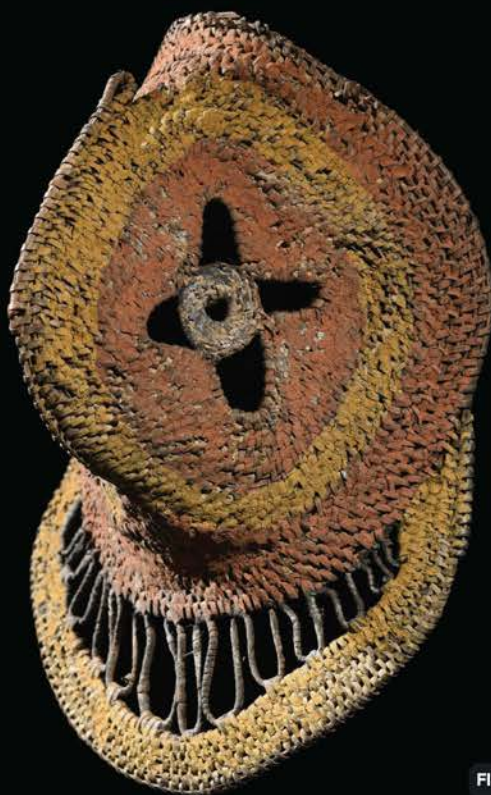


FIG. 10d



Another device used to create imagery is to subtly vary the symmetry of weaving in each of the mask's right and left quadrants. Ingeniously applied, the mask then becomes a single image made up of two unique half masks. The effect produced is remarkable and is illustrated in Fig. 18, which shows the same mask in classic view first (top row, left). Thereafter, the two images on the same row illustrate the same mask, split into halves and presented again in mirror images of themselves.

The bottom row of masks are inverted views of the above.

## Symmetrical Asymmetry

I will leave the reader to judge the artistic outcome of these manipulations, which clearly elicit different attitudes in the work.

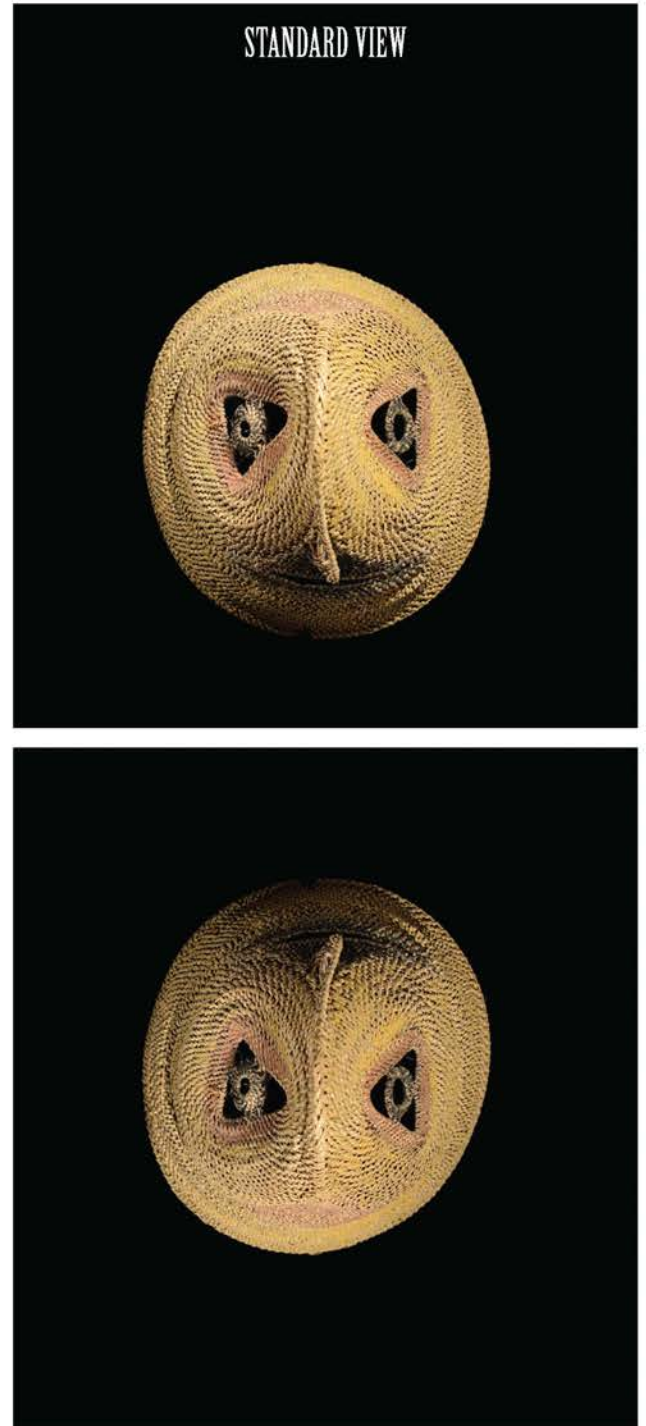


FIG. 18

## BABA MASK

Abelam People, Prince Alexander  
Mountains, Middle Sepik River Region, PNG,

This Baba mask's design is a mastery of balance and expression. In standard position already, the mask has great expression with an owlish look well defined, in tight coils and muted pigments. Upside down, however, the mask takes on a superb and familiar set of features.

Ca. early 20th Cent.

Ex Cavin Morris Gallery, New York

14.5 " - 37 cm

## Exhibitions:

Woven World,  
Selections from Cavin-Morris Gallery  
October 19 - November 19, 2017  
Shick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, NY





#22

#22a







#22b

The following plates present Baba masks in thematic groups. In preparing this project, several collaborators expressed that viewing the masks in this manner helped train their eye and ultimately made the experience easier to relate to.

Since this is an attempt at grouping styles, some earlier images may be repeated.

## Group Plates

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PIG FORM ANCESTORS

Plate 1





FIG. 28





Perhaps the best known feature of the Abelam are the m'Bai, or giant facade paintings, that decorate the front of the men's ceremonial house (*korambo*). With houses reaching as high as 25 meters, the paintings tower above the village's ceremonial grounds (*amei*), situated before them.

## m'Bai Facade Paintings

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## NARANGGWAL

Naranggwal is an initiation grade following Ulke Nau.

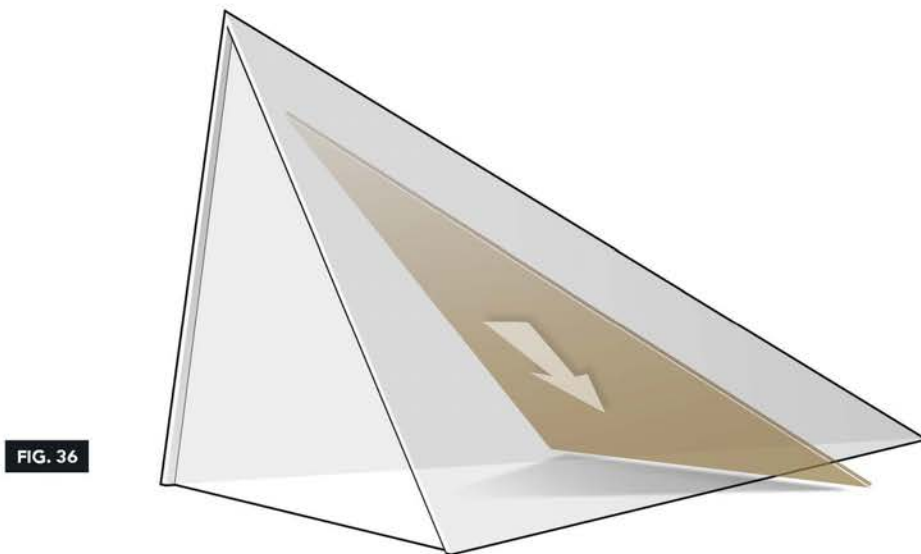
For part of this initiation scene, a false ceiling (*Samban*), resembling the Mbai, is constructed by the men. The ceiling is covered with a painting that duplicates the Mbai and, with the painting facing downward, the structure is positioned in the Korambo at the same inclination as the roof: higher in front and lower in back. Once the ceiling is installed, the men close off the area underneath it to create a chamber that novices will ultimately have to enter, after having crawled through an entrance tunnel. Unbeknown to the novices, while they are passing through the entrance tunnel, the men secretly enter the Korambo from the back and stand ready on the *Samban*, above the initiation chamber.

As soon as the novices enter through the chamber door, chaos erupts with the men hidden on the *Samban* beginning to stomp loudly on the ceiling and the sound of drums filling the air. Professor Hauser-Schäublin vividly describes this scene, recounting that *"The faces of the nggwalndu painted on the ceiling vibrate violently under the stomping steps of the dancing men on top, markedly enhancing the effect of spiritual vivification, a pivotal aspect of the whole procedure."*<sup>30</sup>

The novices, below in the chamber, witness the (duplicate) Mbai painting above them this way, before being led out. The entire scene is described as a dramatic revelation. In reading the account of this ceremony, two aspects within it seemed strange in that: a) the novices have already seen the Mbai, and b) they're also already well acquainted with loud music and singing/dancing, having already passed several initiation grades to get to where they stand that day. So where, exactly, in all of this, was the "dramatic revelation" taking place?

### THE GEOMETRY OF SAMBAN

With the *Samban* being a reproduction of the facade painting, one can only assume that it too is triangular. This, however, poses a geometric issue as we try to fit the triangular facade painting into the Korambo's triangular footprint. This problem is illustrated below:







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